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IV —THE THEME OF *PARADISE LOST*

Readers of *Paradise Lost* have always been interested by Voltaire's comment in the *Essai sur la Poésie Épique*, that French people are inclined to laugh when they are told that England has an epic in which Satan struggles against God and a serpent persuades a woman to eat an apple. Such matter, Voltaire explains, seems in France suitable only for farce. More careful readers, however, may remember that in *Paradise Lost* only Satan, in the moment immediately preceding his degradation, regards the eating of the forbidden fruit as a subject for mirth. All else abhor the crime; angels flee back to heaven in terror, the guilty pair cower before even their own reproaches, and the very face of nature changes. Clearly, the eating of the apple possesses some deep significance and must be interpreted as a symbol of some important truth. In *Christian Doctrine* Milton persuades himself that God purposely made an insignificant matter the sole test of man's obedience, since an apparently useless prohibition would offer the surest proof of man's obedience. But in *Paradise Lost*, and indeed also in *Christian Doctrine*, the symbolical interpretation is insisted on.

This seemingly trivial sin in Eden was intended to denote wilful disregard of divine law. Milton speaks of Adam and Eve as "manifold in sin," implying in those two words, as he elsewhere explains fully,¹ that their guilt comprehended not simply disobedience, but distrust, ingratitude, presumption, deceit, theft, and other sins. And Adam, the guilty one, represents no one individual, but

¹ *P. L.*, 10. 16; *Ch. Doctr.*, p. 254.

man in general. Medieval theologians were fond of finding in Biblical story such types of man. The parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, was commonly interpreted as the story of man in pilgrimage through this mortal life, with Christ only to aid him. Milton, then, is but following precedent in regarding Adam as the representative of the whole race. His theme, which thus assumes both in person and incident an universal significance, may be briefly formulated: mankind, gifted with high instincts and immeasurable capacities for good, but able, at will, to turn each separate virtue into a corresponding vice, determines for himself his own destiny. One is reminded of Dante's interpretation of the *Divine Comedy*: "The subject, then, of the whole work, taken according to the letter alone, is simply a consideration of the state of souls after death. . . But if the work is considered according to its allegorical meaning, the subject is man, liable to the reward or punishment of justice, according as through the freedom of the will he is deserving or undeserving."¹ Both poems face the same great problem.

With such an end in view Milton could not write merely as Hebrew annalist or Christian theologian. He was free to read the Bible as a poet, not a historian, and to interpret it liberally. In *Paradise Lost* he apparently accepts the story of creation less literally than in *Christian Doctrine*, and he clearly values the rebellion of Lucifer and the sin in Eden not as historical fact but as symbolical of moral truth.² God has seen fit to reveal heavenly things to man in terms that he from his own experience can comprehend. But such materialism, or anthropomorphism, justified simply as a concrete mode of handling celestial truth, must

¹ *Letter to Can Grande*, ed. Latham, p. 195.

² *P. L.*, 5. 570-576; 6. 893-897; 7. 174-181.

not blind one to the truths involved. It was the act of creation, not its duration; the fact that God or the right can triumph over Satan, the wrong, and not the military strategy employed; the sin of Adam and its consequences, and not the outward form of that sin, that seemed of vital consequence to Milton. He could have written *Paradise Lost* just as he did had he been conversant with all the revelations of modern science; for his purpose is not to record fact, but to expound the workings of moral law.¹

Such a theme, however, is as little theological as historical. Some dogma may enter into the poem; but the author's main concern is something other than that. It may easily be shown that *Paradise Lost* is neither Calvinistic, as many have charged, nor Unitarian. Milton, on the one hand, denies the doctrine of predestination, and, on the other, holds his own belief regarding the nature of the Trinity. But no dogma is introduced that does not bear directly on the philosophical and ethical problem of man's relations to the opposed forces of good and evil. The doctrine of the freedom of the will explains the possibility of evil's arising in heaven and on earth; predestination is discussed only to prove man's freedom of will and to justify punishment imposed for wrong-doing. Milton's attention is firmly fixed on his central theme—the origin and course of evil.

In the story of Lucifer's revolt and man's fall Milton finds it easier to trace the course of evil in modern life than to find a satisfactory explanation for the origin of sin in a universe ruled by an all-wise creator. He represents first the original, self-begotten guilt of Satan, in the loathsome figure of Sin, sprung suddenly, like Minerva, from

¹ Colet's liberal interpretation of *Genesis* I intend to discuss in a fuller treatment of this subject.

her parent's head, and of Death, born of incestuous union of Sin with her parent. The derivative guilt of Adam follows, who loses his innocence as a result of already existent evil. Just as there are two distinct but mutually related plots, one enacted in heaven, the other in part on earth, so there are these two forms of evil whose workings Milton would explain.

It is easy to account for the sin of Adam. Evil already exists and man has free choice of right or wrong. God himself explains that this freedom was given the angels and men that they might honor and reverence their creator, as they could not do were their actions ruled by the divine will. This, however, seems only a dogma formulated because the human mind is unable to conceive of good without its counterpart of evil; existence of the one implies the existence of the other. But the dogma applies better to earth than to heaven, and it is more difficult for Milton to account for the revolt of Lucifer—that is, for the origin of sin in a perfect world. Milton does not disregard the problem as Vondel does, who, without excuse or explanation, represents one-third of the angelic host as ruled by ambition, jealousy, and even lust. Milton simply makes no distinction between the psychology of angels and of men; and in heaven, as on earth, honor, obedience, and reverence imply the potential existence of corresponding vices. God explains the situation thus: ¹

I made him just and right,
Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall
Such I created all the Ethereal Powers
And Spirits, both them who stood and them who failed.

Milton, however, distinguishes between the guilt of Satan and of Adam. Since Satan fell self-tempted, and

¹ *P. L.*, 3. 98-101.

since in his crime no element of good entered, his sin was unpardonable. Adam, on the contrary, sinned in part through the fault of another, and his action sprang from desires in themselves not altogether base. Hence Adam's sin was not beyond forgiveness. The poet's main intent seems to be to accept as fact the existence of evil, and to disclose concretely, after the fashion of poetry, its inevitable consequences.

Milton's conception of the fundamental distinction between good and evil seems to be that good is self-creative and ever-growing, whereas evil is destructive and in the end self-annihilating. God, the all wise and all good and all powerful, creates Christ and then the angels. Christ, filled with the power of God, creates the visible universe and then mankind. All this was good, as *Genesis* tells us, and all sprang from good, or from self. Evil, on the contrary, can produce only evil, and leads eventually to its own destruction. The revolt of Lucifer brings, as its consequence, the creation of the realm of misery and evil passions, as the antithesis of heaven; the humiliation and complete degradation of Satan and his followers, symbolized by their transformation to serpent form; and the temporary loss of paradise for man. So the course of evil is directly opposite to that of good. Satan confesses: ¹

For only in destroying I find ease
To my relentless thoughts;

and he himself realizes clearly that the one result of all his effort must be ruin.

But from me what can proceed
But all corrupt—both mind and will depraved
Not to do only, but to will the same
With me?²

¹ *P. L.*, 9. 129-130.

² *P. L.*, 10. 824-827.

If evil in this way always begets evil, it must eventually effect its own destruction. Satan, on beholding the superior nobility of newly created man, is forced to admit his inferiority:

So much hath Hell debased, and pain
Enfeebled me, to what I was in Heaven.¹

The final step in his complete degradation is effectively portrayed, and with obvious symbolism, in the scene where Satan would announce to the expectant rebels in hell his seeming triumph:²

So having said, a while he stood, expecting
Their universal shout and high applause
To fill his ear; when, contrary, he hears,
On all sides, from innumerable tongues
A dismal universal hiss, the sound
Of public scorn. He wondered, but not long
Had leisure, wondering at himself now more.
His visage drawn he felt to sharp and spare,
His arms clung to his ribs, his legs entwining
Each other, till, supplanted, down he fell,
A monstrous serpent on his belly prone,
Reluctant, but in vain; a greater power
Now ruled him, punished in the shape he sinned,
According to his doom. . . .

Thus was the applause they meant
Turned to exploding hiss, triumph to shame
Cast on themselves from their own mouths.

Such self-destructive elements of sin leave the good in the end triumphant. Throughout *Paradise Lost* this truth is expressed again and again. The angel-messenger, Zephon, once so inferior to Lucifer in station and power, feels no longer any awe or fear in his presence.

¹ *P. L.*, 9. 487-488.

² *P. L.*, 10. 504-517, 545-547.

To whom thus Zephon, answering scorn with scorn:—
 “Think not, revolted Spirit, thy shape the same,
 Or undiminished brightness, to be known
 As when thou stood'st in Heaven upright and pure.
 That glory then, when thou no more wast good,
 Departed from thee; and thou resemblest now
 Thy sin and place of doom obscure and foul.”

Zephon's rebuke is keenly felt:

Abashed the Devil stood,
 And felt how awful goodness is, and saw
 Virtue in her shape how lovely—saw, and pined
 His loss; but chiefly to find here observed
 His lustre visibly impaired.¹

Satan may remain undaunted; but his determination
 availed nothing against the will of the higher power; for
 against that will he could not have moved even a muscle.

So stretched out huge in length the Arch-Fiend lay,
 Chained on the burning lake; nor ever thence
 Had risen, or heaved his head, but that the will
 And high permission of all-ruling Heaven
 Left him at large to his own dark designs,
 That with reiterated crimes he might
 Heap on himself damnation, while he sought
 Evil to others, and enraged might see
 How all his malice served but to bring forth
 Infinite goodness, grace, and mercy, shewn
 On Man by him seduced, but on himself
 Treble confusion, wrath, and vengeance poured.²

The powers of evil, which are thus chained absolutely
 by the will of God, are themselves made productive of good.
 Seeing this truth, Adam exclaims: ³

O Goodness infinite, Goodness immense,
 That all this good of evil shall produce,
 And evil turn to good.

¹ *P. L.*, 4. 834-840, 846-850.

² *P. L.*, 1. 209-220.

³ *P. L.*, 12. 469-473.

This principle has been more concretely formulated by Shakespeare in *King Lear*. In no other one of his plays do the forces of evil seem to triumph more easily and surely; the plans of Goneril and Regan and of Edmund meet with immediate success. But the evil done springs up as virtue in the hearts of others. Kent loses his brusqueness and insolence and displays only an unselfish loyalty; Albany casts aside his subserviency and stands for the right; Lear forgets his vanity and imperiousness and learns to think and feel for others and to suffer without complaint. And as the good thus grows in stony soil the evil chokes itself. Rivalry, jealousy, and hate among the evil-doers turn victory to defeat and leave the forces of the right triumphant. *King Lear* in this way is founded on the principle that Milton propounds in *Paradise Lost* and elsewhere in his writings. The elder brother in *Comus* is said to talk nonsense regarding the self-defensive strength of righteousness; but the poet believed it. With equal faith, too, he declared in *Areopagitica*, "Let her [Truth] and falsehood grapple, whoever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?" Intense idealist that he was, he could not conceive of any long-enduring supremacy of evil, and *Paradise Lost* shows how the right can and must prevail.

Such an analysis of *Paradise Lost* deposes Satan once for all from the position of epic hero, to which he has been sometimes exalted. Those who read the poem simply as a story, and possibly only for what the first two books contain, have naturally felt the tremendous force of Satan's personality; for he really has more individuality and aggressive will than any other character. They know, too, that Milton himself battled for liberty and suffered in consequence, and without warrant they jump to the conclusion

that Satan must be the hero of the poem and the spokesman of Milton himself. The romantic poets of the nineteenth century, especially Byron and Shelley, with their absolutely erroneous conception of the meaning of liberty, gave their sanction to such misreading of the poem. Hence the statement is often made that Satan is the hero, and that the first two books are the best of the whole.

But Milton assuredly did not regard Satan as a martyr in the cause of liberty. "None can love freedom heartily but good men," he declared; for he drew a clear distinction between license and that "true liberty . . . which always with right reason dwells."¹ A character, therefore, like Satan could not represent the heroic. Milton represents him first in all the might that evil for a time may possess; but even here Satan lacks the repose, the reserve force, that the heroic, either in Michelangelo's sculpture or in literature, must possess. In subsequent scenes Satan's loss of self-respect, his feeling of inferiority, his final degradation, make him a most unheroic figure. And indeed, as the embodiment of all evil, he could have been nothing else to Milton. Milton had read and accepted the principle of the Italian critics that the epic hero for modern peoples must be not simply a mighty warrior, but a Christian knight as well, whose actions conform to our highest religious ideals. This principle was readily accepted by the Puritan poet, who "never at any time, wrote anything which I did not think agreeable to truth, to justice, and to piety."² Satan, in the light of this, is neither the strongest nor the most inspiring personage in *Paradise Lost*.

Instead, the fallen angel symbolizes sin in all its stages, at first powerful to attract and command, but soon degrad-

¹ *Tenure*, p. 1; *P. L.*, 2. 83-84.

² *Sec. Def.* 1. 238.

ing and loathsome. He moves through the whole poem, in the rôle of epic antagonist, as the antithesis of all good. In the first plot, he heads the revolt in heaven with such force and generalship that only Christ, armed with the full power of deity, can overcome him. Christ, therefore, is the hero of this story—a hero both in the field and in the council hall, where he offers himself as mediator for man. This is the significance of his words:¹

But I shall rise victorious, and subdue
My vanquisher, spoiled of his vaunted spoil.
Death his death's wound shall then receive, and stoop
Inglorious, of his mortal sting disarmed;
I through the ample air in triumph high
Shall lead Hell captive maugre Hell, and show
The powers of Darkness bound.

To these claims God gives ready assent:

All power
I give thee; reign forever, and assume
Thy merits; under thee, as Head Supreme,
Thrones, Princedoms, Powers, Dominions, I reduce:
All knees to thee shall bow of them that bide
In Heaven, or Earth, or, under Earth, in Hell.
When thou, attended gloriously from Heaven,
Shalt in the sky appear, and from thee send
The summoning Archangels to proclaim
Thy dread tribunal, forthwith from all winds
The living, and forthwith the cited dead
Of all past ages, to the general doom
Shall hasten; such a peal shall rouse their sleep.
Then, all thy Saints assembled, thou shalt judge
Bad men and Angels; they arraigned shall sink
Beneath thy sentence; Hell, her numbers full,
Thenceforth shall be for ever shut. Meanwhile
The World shall burn, and from her ashes spring
New Heaven and Earth, wherein the just shall dwell,
And, after all their tribulations long,
See golden days, fruitful of golden deeds,
With Joy and Love triumphing, and fair Truth.

¹ P. L., 3. 250-256.

Of the other plot, laid in the Garden, Adam must be counted the hero. Fallen though he may be, he has through Christ's intercession the means of an eventual triumph. He represents the race, and his victory displays symbolically the great lesson that the race must learn. Christ is the hero of one portion of the story, and Adam plus Christ, the hero of the second.

It may at first seem strange to depose Satan as hero in order to exalt the victim of his wiles. The greatness of Adam, however, lies in latent psychological powers. Innate in him are instincts that open dimly a vision of unseen powers ruling his destiny, and he implores his angel-guide for further insight:

Tell, if ye saw, how came I thus, how here!
Not of myself; by some great Maker then,
In goodness and in power pre-eminent.¹

So he would learn the hidden mysteries that the Heavens declare. He has yet to learn, by bitter experience, how man's earthly environment may displace these aspirations by others, which, being not altogether ignoble, are alluring and dangerous in the extreme. Raphael forewarns him that a desire for knowledge, like any other virtue, if carried to excess becomes a vice, and that man, instead of seeking to fathom all the secrets of the universe, should learn to use rightly what the Creator intends him to know.

Solicit not thy thoughts with matters hid:
Leave them to God above; him serve and fear.
... Heaven is for thee too high
To know what passes there. Be lowly wise;
Think only what concerns thee and thy being;
Dream not of other worlds, what creatures there
Live, in what state, condition, or degree –
Contented that thus far hath been revealed
Not of Earth only, but of highest Heaven.²

¹*P. L.*, 8. 277-279.

²*P. L.*, 8. 167-178.

Living in this way his divinely appointed lot, enkindled by the consciousness that man "dwells not in his own," Adam is made part of a vaster life and becomes a hero.

Raphael's instruction profits Adam but little. A dearly bought lesson and Michael's revelation of human destiny must be added before Adam learns to bring both his actions and his will into conformity with divine plans. Eve, with what Milton would call a woman's lack of insight and reason, seeks means of evading God's judgment; suicide or a childless life, she thinks, will defeat God's purposes for the race. But Adam, whose "more attentive mind" recalls the promise that mitigated Christ's stern sentence, accepts the punishment courageously.

With labour I must earn
My bread; what harm? Idleness had been worse;
My labour will sustain me,

he says;¹ for he sees that God's will rightly prevails. With this submission comes a great consolation—that wherever God's will prevails God himself must be. Michael's assurance to him is:²

Yet doubt not but in valley and in plain
God is, as here, and will be found alike
Present, and of his presence many a sign
Still following thee, still compassing thee round
With goodness and paternal love, his face
Express, and of his steps the track divine.

What matters it, then, whether Adam's work be in Eden or elsewhere? The one great essential is this:³

Nor love thy life, nor hate; but what thou liv'st
Live well; how long or short permit to Heaven.

¹ *P. L.*, 10. 1054-1057.

² *P. L.*, 11. 349-354.

³ *P. L.*, 11. 553-554.

This noble principle, which was Milton's own life's motto,
Adam finally accepts.¹

Henceforth I learn that to obey is best,
And love with fear the only God, to walk
As in his presence, ever to observe
His providence, and on him sole depend,
Merciful over all his works, with good
Still overcoming evil, and by small
Accomplishing great things—by things deemed weak
Subverting worldly-strong, and worldly-wise
By simply meek; that suffering for Truth's sake
Is fortitude to highest victory,
And to the faithful death the gate of life—
Taught this by his example whom I now
Acknowledge my Redeemer ever blest,

All this the angel reaffirms.

This having learned, thou hast attained the sum
Of wisdom; hope no higher, though all the stars
Thou knew'st by name, and all the ethereal powers,
Ail secrets of the Deep, all Nature's works,
Or works of God in heaven, air, earth, or sea,
And all the riches of this world enjoy'dst,
And all the rule, one empire. Only add
Deeds to thy knowledge answerable; add faith;
Add virtue, patience, temperance; add love,
By name to come called Charity, the soul
Of all the rest: then wilt thou not be loth
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
A Paradise within thee happier far.

Adam can now leave the garden to face his destiny without
dismay;

The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide.
They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.

¹ P. L., 12. 561-573, 575-587.

With these words the great epic ends. Years of studious meditation and nobly planned effort and suffering had left with the Puritan poet this revelation of the ways of God to men. *Paradise Lost* thus becomes virtually a paradise, though of another sort, regained; and the poem may be called another Divine Comedy. The Italian poem proceeds steadily, without retrogression, from the wood of error to the radiant glory of the rose of heaven, whereas the movement of *Paradise Lost* is twofold, from happy innocence to sin and from the agonies of sin to renewed righteousness and trust. This is the theme of *Job*, also, and of the Prometheus trilogy, it is supposed, and of all the highest art. Such regaining of paradise is the poet's real story.

Just one more matter relating to the theme of *Paradise Lost* remains to be considered. If the epic ends with this assured promise of salvation, of return to a higher Eden, what does *Paradise Regained* add to Milton's work? According to a well-known story, Milton's Quaker friend, Thomas Ellwood, handed back the manuscript of the earlier epic to its author with the remark, "Thou hast said much, here, of *Paradise Lost*: but what hast thou to say of *Paradise* found?"¹ The objection is not well taken; from the fifth line of *Paradise Lost* to the end, the regaining of paradise is ever the end in view.

Paradise Regained, therefore, is no necessary sequel of *Paradise Lost*; it simply relates, in more concrete and expanded form, the other's fundamental thought. The same thought underlies the third great poem of Milton's maturity, *Samson Agonistes*. The hero of *Paradise Lost* is Adam, who through Christ learns his relation to God

¹ Thomas Ellwood. "Relations with John Milton," *English Garner, Critical Essays and Literary Fragments*, pp. 135-148.

and wins salvation. The hero of *Paradise Regained* is Christ in the form of man, a greater Adam, who sets the world an example of victorious resistance of temptation. The text of the second epic is that truth already quoted from the first, which begins,

Henceforth I learn that to obey is best.

By bitter experience Samson learns the same lesson. *Paradise Lost* approaches this theme through long epic development; *Paradise Regained*, whose scope is so much more limited, is centered about it; *Samson Agonistes*, whose hero is merely an individual and not a type, deals with it still less broadly. But all three poems express, each in its own way, the central conviction of Milton's life and thought.

With such reference to its inner meaning *Paradise Lost* must be interpreted if it is ever again to hold the place in men's minds that it once had. To claim an appreciation for the poetry of the epic, and at the same time to disparage its content, betokens an altogether erroneous idea of what poetry and literature really are. The thought of *Paradise Lost*, if it be a masterpiece of literature, must be worthy of its form; indeed, must be superior to its form. But that thought can never again be accepted as a literally veracious account of the creation and the fall; it is doubtful if Milton, the poet, accepted it as such. The reader must learn to see beneath the surface the great truths that the story expresses. *Paradise Lost* will then be not an antiquated version of man's earliest history, but a poetic exposition of eternal moral law.

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